Northeast Asian Nationalism and Future US Regional Strategy
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Northeast Asia is undergoing a major strategic realignment. The sources of change vary from system to system, but heightened nationalism within each country's internal politics is consistent across all of them. A fundamental challenge confronting US policy makers is to understand the sources of national identity and cohesion, even as they differ from case to case. Nationalism often gets a bad press, but it need not, especially if it can be harnessed to credible policy goals. But it is critically important that the United States grasp how US strategies filter through the prism of different national identities, thereby affecting whether leaders actively collaborate with the US, pursue more measured, conditional engagement, or overtly oppose American policy. Such understanding seems essential if the United States, already hugely burdened by its involvements in the Islamic world, is not to run afoul of potentially volatile internal forces within various regional states.

The evidence of heightened national identities is incontestable. China, Japan, both Koreas, and Russia (some more seriously than others) are all seeking to redefine their roles in regional politics, economics, and security. Though the contours of a new regional order remain subject to major uncertainties and risks, Northeast Asia over the longer term seems likely to assume a more regional flavor than was evident during the Cold War. The US will still be deeply enmeshed in regional politics, economics, security, and technological development, but in a geographic sense it will remain an outsider. When Northeast Asia was far weaker and more vulnerable, the American presence (especially the US military presence) was not open to serious question. This era is passing, but this attests to American policy success, not to failure. As indigenous identities, self confidence, capabilities, and competence grow, it begs an obvious question: how does the United States reconfigure its regional role to ensure that

American strategic interests are protected, and that US influence does not diminish as Northeast Asia increasingly comes of age?

This challenge will not be met by reinventing past policies. The Cold War may have ended a decade and a half ago, but many of its vestiges have persisted in Northeast Asia, even when they have long outlived their utility. An American-designed "hub and spokes" system long defined regional security, but these bilateral arrangements are demonstrably insufficient to address the transition and transformation under way in Northeast Asia, including the potential for a larger crisis related to North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons. With the United States still deeply preoccupied by events in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the Islamic world, American attention to the region seems episodic and distracted, and hardly commensurate with the strategic stakes for US interests. For example, the heated debate in South Korea over return of operational control of the ROK's armed forces from Washington to Seoul, though unhelpfully embroiled in Korean internal politics, reflects a long-deferred issue that touches on deeply held beliefs about sovereignty and national autonomy. Past policies cannot simply be jettisoned; they need to be supplanted by approaches that are viable in a domestic context within various societies, and provide clear incentives for regional actors to sustain collaboration with the United States, rather than pursue alternatives to close ties with the United States.

The strategic stakes for the United States across Northeast Asia could hardly be higher. According to OECD data, four of the world's ten largest economies (the US, Japan, China, and South Korea) are present in Northeast Asia, including those ranking first, second, and fourth in aggregate national power. Moreover, these societies constitute some of the principal engines of growth in the global economy. The immediate security implications are at least as pronounced. Three of the world's long established nuclear powers (the US, Russia, and China) interact here. North Korea also claims standing as a nuclear weapons state, potentially triggering reassessment of the non-nuclear policies of other states, most notably Japan. The strategic reach and conventional military capacities of various regional actors continue to grow, all largely in the absence of discernible arrangements to inhibit power rivalries or limit the potential risks of armed conflict. The

consequences of a major political-military crisis or of renewed warfare in the region for the global economy would be unimaginable.

The states of Northeast Asia, moreover, are no longer passive or compliant, simply waiting for America to decide and to act. China's quest for wealth and power and Japan's more assertive international role are at the center of such change, but all regional states are seeking to enhance their autonomy and assert their political and strategic identities. There is undoubted respect for American power (especially American military power), but this does not imply automatic subordination or deference to American policy preferences. Though none dispute the singularity of America's global reach, US military power cannot stand alone as an instrument of American influence. The United States still looms very large in regional policy calculations, but all regional states seem intent on redefining their relationship with American power. The United States must therefore devise a larger regional strategy that can harness disparate national identities and capabilities to shared or complementary ends. It is easier said than done.

The ascendance of China and the recovery of Japan constitute the largest changes in Northeast Asia. Beijing's development-oriented policies now span almost three decades, which constitutes nearly half the political life of the People's Republic of China. Various US officials characterize China as a state facing a "strategic crossroads," but this label must seem oddly quaint to China's citizens and leadership and to the region as a whole. China's leaders long ago decided to pursue the comprehensive enhancement of national power and market-oriented development; this is not a decision that still hangs in the balance, as implied by the above label. China has not employed military force on a significant scale since its attack on northern Vietnam in the spring of 1979, and its leaders seem increasingly mindful of the risks and liabilities that would be entailed in resuming coercive strategies. Beijing enjoys ever more enhanced ties with every state of consequence in the international system. It has resolved or amply diminished border disputes with nearly all its continental neighbors, though maritime rivalries persist, especially with Japan. China's economic, political, and military centrality is acknowledged and accepted virtually without exception. Moreover, China continues to pursue national development without a declared major threat, and with no evident interest in acquiring one, even as it steadily builds a more credible, modernized military

capability. Pronounced unease about "China's rise" is limited principally to the US and Japan (with Taiwan as a special case), even as all three largely exempt economic ties from these expressed concerns.

Following a decade and a half of stagnation and contraction, Japan is experiencing an economic recovery and is vigorously pursuing a more meaningful political identity. Renewed growth is attributable in part to privatization and enhanced economic efficiency, but even more to greatly expanded economic links with China. Japan, first under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and very shortly under his presumptive successor, Shinzo Abe, is assuming a much more engaged international role, with this activism explicitly endorsed and encouraged by the United States. The US-Japan alliance may be achieving new heights, but there has been no commensurate rise in Japan's influence in East Asia. Tokyo voices increasing anxiety about developments in both Koreas and in China, and all three states exhibit comparable wariness or outright animosity toward Tokyo. This creates a growing possibility of an imbalanced Japanese strategy-i.e., one that draws Tokyo ever closer to the United States while being explicitly or potentially alienated from its neighbors. This is not a formula for longer-term regional stability, nor is it one that advances longer-term US or Japanese interests.

The United States therefore finds itself uneasily positioned between East Asia's two major powers. Though America's natural affinities align with a democratic Japan that is emerging as a "normal power," the appeal of relying on Japan as a presumptive balancer of an ascendant China is more illusory than real. Washington cannot expect to effect longer term regional stability without a durable accommodation with China as a fully legitimated major power. Though characterizing China (in the words of former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick) as a "responsible stakeholder" would seem to move US policy in such a direction, the United States in a longer run sense will not be able to pick and choose which dimensions of China's pursuit of major power status are acceptable or unacceptable. Beijing seeks an unquestioned seat at the table, not simply a notional one, and Tokyo's goal seems much the same. Indeed, despite prevailing Sino-Japanese animosities, the only realistic alternative is for both countries to seek a tolerable equilibrium in bilateral relations, on the assumption that neither opts for an adversarial strategy toward the other. Though some US strategists anticipate and almost seem to

welcome a contest between China and Japan for regional dominance, this would be a disaster for American interests, and the United States should actively seek to discourage these possibilities.

China is ever more an arrived power, and it is not realistic to assume that the US will somehow be able to deny China such status. The Bush Administration increasingly recognizes that as China's economic and political reach continue to grow and diversify, there is an ever larger need for multiple channels for high level policy interaction and coordination. These extend to a growing web of consultative arrangements on economics, science and technology, energy development, and (to a lesser but growing degree) military to military relations. These mechanisms include the establishment of a semi-annual US-China Strategic Economic Dialogue, announced on September 20 during Treasury Secretary Paulson's visit to Beijing. But there is an incompleteness and tentativeness to this accommodation. The Bush Administration and the Congress continue to voice major dissatisfaction about many areas of Chinese policy, at least as they are perceived by the United States. In the prevailing critique, the United States claims that China's long-term "strategic intentions" remain unknown; that China lacks transparency in its defense goals and programs; that its military build-up is "outsized" and therefore disproportionate to the presumed challenges to Chinese security; that China is pursuing a neomercantilist strategy, especially with respect to energy resources; that China's economy (despite its membership in the World Trade Organization) is insufficiently rule-based and skewed in Beijing's favor by an undervalued currency; and that China continues to deny its citizens their legitimate rights, open access to information, and unhampered pursuit of their political aspirations. As a consequence, the United States continues to pursue an engagement strategy with China, but with a declared hedge as a strategic alternative should more optimistic renderings of China's longer-term relations with the United States not materialize.

Time does not permit a detailed rendering of the Chinese rebuttal to these criticisms; suffice it to say that many Chinese (and not simply government officials) would object to most of them. Indeed, Chinese strategic observers offer a parallel critique focused on American strategies toward China. There is an abiding Chinese wariness about US strategic intentions that resonates with American unease about

China's rapid development. At bottom, most politically attentive Chinese believe that the US is not prepared to accord China full legitimacy and acceptance as a major power. As a consequence, even as China seems intent on keeping its powder dry, the leadership has concluded that it must have the capability to protect Chinese vital interests in the face of either benign or malign possibilities, including the appreciable enhancement of Chinese military capabilities. A darker view is that the United States actively conspires to keep China divided and weak. But this argument seems forced in the context of a US $200 billion bilateral trade deficit (though much of this deficit is attributable to exports of US multinationals based in China), burgeoning US foreign direct investment in China, and the major role of American universities in educating Chinese students, both in China and in the US.

The mainstream view in China continues to favor cooperation and enhanced ties with the United States, irrespective of underlying suspicions about longer-term US intentions. Beijing continues to pursue a "walking on two legs" strategy-i.e., keeping off America's strategic radar screen and fostering collaborative ties wherever possible, while diversifying China's political and economic options and developing sufficient military capabilities to inhibit any use of US power against China's vital interests. In essence, Beijing is pursuing an "engagement and hedging" strategy of its own. This encompasses "market tests" of Beijing's indigenously-developed political and security concepts, premised on efforts to diminish regional tensions wherever feasible, and avoiding any test of wills with the United States. In addition, China now regularly asserts that it has no intention to undermine US military deployments or alliance strategies in East Asia, provided that US strategies are not directed against China. At the same time, Beijing has steadily but unmistakably redefined its strategy toward Taiwan, insisting that it seeks to forestall permanent separation between Taiwan and the mainland, not compel national unification. In their totality, these policies comprise China's alternative to threat-based planning, even as this alternative does not place any limitations on China's pursuit of longer-term military development.

As seen from Beijing, this strategy has enabled China to successfully manage but not fully inhibit the exercise of American power in the West Pacific. However, the threat of Taiwan independence has been reduced; the role of Taiwan's president Chen Shui-bian

has been marginalized; and the Chinese Communist Party (through its normalized ties with Taiwan's leading opposition parties) has been able to insert itself into the island's domestic politics. At the same time, China has made steady inroads with key long-term US allies (most notably, South Korea and Australia), both of whom view ever larger political and economic ties with Beijing as integral to their future national strategies. Thus, an ascendant Japan (encouraged and abetted by Washington) looms as China's primary external political and security challenge.

Despite the clear US focus on China's international behavior, internal challenges and uncertainties weigh much heavier on Chinese leadership calculations. Senior leaders, beginning with President Hu Jintao, explicitly recognize that a host of internal problems – encompassing income inequality, corruption, societal alienation, environmental degradation, and latent instability within the population- constitute far more pressing threats to their hold on power than any prospective external challenges. China is governed by a technically competent but largely risk-averse leadership that seeks above all to avoid abrupt surprises or shocks to the Chinese system, thereby endeavoring to keep a lid on the possibility of "bottom up" pressures for change. The leadership therefore faces two simultaneous challenges: can the Chinese Communist Party deflect heightened pressures for internal change and manage a restive society? And can the leadership cope with unforeseen events and the loss of information control without undermining China's continued economic success?

But leaders in Beijing understand keenly that external uncertainties and risks could also impinge in a major way on internal stability and development. Four major questions loom. Can China avoid renewed regional polarization that would limit its modernization prospects? Can China (in conjunction with the US and Japan) devise "rules of engagement" in areas of potential conflict? Can China move toward durable security understandings (i.e., mutually agreed restraints on the exercise of military power) with both its continental and maritime neighbors? And can China prevent or avert a strategic breakdown or major crisis that destabilizes the region and undermines the prospects for national development?

The latent possibilities of an acute crisis related to Taiwan or to North Korea's nuclear weapons development loom as the largest concerns. Both cases highlight the

inherent limits and potential liabilities of the United States and China proceeding in largely autonomous fashion, without developing mechanisms for addressing and managing the risks that a major crisis would pose to both states. For example, if it ultimately proves impossible to prevent North Korea from more fully pursuing a nuclear weapons capability, an additional risk is that the "blame game" will begin in earnest, when the US and China should be far more perturbed by the North's overt nuclearization and focused on mitigating the potential consequences. Moreover, there would be ample collective responsibility for failing to prevent nuclear weapons development in the North. Finger pointing will do no good, and could well deflect attention away from Pyongyang's actions and the acute risks they would pose to the region as a whole.

Though the Bush Administration has undertaken significant steps to stabilize and advance Sino-American political, economic, and security relations, far larger efforts have focused on reconfiguring the US-Japan alliance. The United States has explicitly encouraged Japan's pursuit of "normal power" status, thereby seeking to directly influence Japanese internal debate. Washington deems such changes wholly inappropriate and long overdue. Tokyo therefore remains America's unquestioned "partner of choice." By contrast, the US alliance with the South Korea continues to experience acute strain and its future prospects seem increasingly uncertain. Heightened Korean nationalism is therefore viewed as undermining political and security collaboration with the United States, whereas heightened Japanese nationalism is viewed as advancing the possibilities for alliance cohesion. Enhanced alliance bonds with Washington provide Tokyo ample political cover for an enhanced, more outwardly oriented defense capability, even as they also advance the administration's policy goals. The Bush Administration clearly seeks Japan's operational enmeshment in US global defense planning, beginning with much augmented US access to Japanese facilities and bases. North Korea's July 2006 ballistic missile tests have made this transition "easier," providing Tokyo with additional running room in pursuit of more assertive policies and more autonomous capabilities.

When weighed against the DoD's declared need to deploy American air and naval power in and through the West Pacific, the gains for US military strategy are self evident. But there are clear political liabilities and costs in a regional context. Japan's internal

political realignment has not garnered acceptance or enhanced legitimacy for Tokyo within East Asia; if anything, it has undermined it. A Japan that remains alienated from its neighbors will not be able to assume a regional role commensurate with its national power and aspirations, and that the United States clearly seeks to advance. A major looming test of the post-Koizumi era is whether Japan will be able to reestablish its legitimacy in regional politics and security, either by its own efforts or with the encouragement of the United States. Does the US urge a larger Japanese effort at regional reconciliation as Tokyo advances toward more "normal nation" status, or does the US (perceiving clear benefits to US interests) continue to opt for a Japan-dominated US regional strategy, no matter what the potential liabilities and limitations these entail elsewhere in Northeast Asia?

In recent years, with the United States preoccupied by crises in the Islamic world, Northeast Asia has not received the sustained focus it unquestionably warrants. Yet the policy record of recent years suggests that the US lacks a larger regional strategy that would entail the ample commitment of the time and attention of senior policy makers. The explicit outsourcing of the North Korean nuclear issue to China, the degrading of the US-Korea alliance (no doubt in part given US unhappiness over President Roh Moo-hyun's open-ended accommodation with North Korea, despite Pyongyang's nuclear defiance), the singular attention to enhancing the alliance with Tokyo irrespective of regional reactions beg a larger issue: beyond immediate US defense planning requirements, is there an underlying concept that animates and integrates American regional strategy? Or is the United States largely content to let the political-security identities of China and Japan increasingly define Northeast Asia's future, with the US role characterized primarily by its proven capability to amass military power for a major regional contingency?

America's fundamental long-term interests would be ill served by a strategy skewed disproportionately to crisis planning, presuming that the region will somehow otherwise take care of itself. The United States does not want to find itself on the outside looking in. It needs to devote continued, diligent efforts to shaping the incentives of all regional states to move toward more mature, collaborative relations with one another, and in which the United States also constitutes a full and effective presence. Without such a

US role, the states of Northeast Asia could well pursue unilateral advantage both in national strategies and in longer-term weapons development, thereby rendering the region as a whole far less predictable or stable. Avoiding such an outcome must remain a central US policy objective in a region of paramount importance to American political, economic, and security interests, which will only be realized through continued US engagement in all its forms.